WHAT · IS · ART?

BY

S. G. W. BENJAMIN

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WHAT IS ART,

OR

ART THEORIES AND METHODS CONCISELY STATED.

BY

S. G. W. BENJAMIN.

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TO MY FRIEND,

E. L. WEEKS.

INTRODUCTION.

The writer has often been asked by persons desirous of gaining a general idea of art within a brief space, where a work answering their purpose could be found. In the hope of meeting this want of a class which is constantly increasing in the community, he ventures to put into print a lecture which has been given with acceptance at the Essex Institute, the Massachusetts Normal Art School, the Boston Art Club, Bowdoin College, and several similar institutions. That this essay was not originally prepared for publication will explain, in part, certain passages more appropriate for oral delivery than for print.

THEORY AND PRACTICE OF ART.

I.

We are about to discuss the Theory and Practice of Art. That we are assembled here at this time is a strong proof of some of the theories and facts that we propose to consider. Thirty-five years ago artists in America were few in number; no school of art existed worth the mention; art clubs and associations were almost unknown in the land. Our public buildings and private residences of the better class were wooden band-boxes with so called classic porticoes in front. Here and there an artist like Allston or Gilbert Stuart showed the quality of the national art talent still latent, and what might be done in the direction of art at some future period; here and there private gentlemen collected a few of the smaller works of foreign artists of note. But the public in general cared little and knew nothing of the theory and practice of the

Fine Arts. Now it is quite the reverse. We are still in the alphabet of our art knowledge, as a people, but all over the more cultivated portions of the country there is an awakening on the subject. Art clubs, life schools, and galleries of paintings are springing up in our leading cities; art education is becoming a question demanding the supervision of the State; an art literature from the pens of American writers is gradually claiming the attention of the public; courses of art lectures are gaining importance in our lyceums, and men who one generation ago would have scarcely given the subject a thought, or would have considered it at best a frivolous matter, are now devoting their energies to the elucidation of the moral bearings of art on the elevation of the race, and its special relations to our people at the present time. As in everything else which the Americans take up with enthusiasm, we are giving the subject such rapid and intense attention that we are liable to omit the thorough mastery of the principles and the details of the theory and practice of art without which the knowledge of both the professional artist and the connoisseur must be more or less superficial. For this reason it may be well to renew our survey of the field in order better

to understand what is the real character of art, what is its scope, what are its limitations, and in what relation we stand to it ourselves.

As suggested already, our appearance here this evening is one proof of the true nature of art. We are here because we are a part of the American people who are to-day impelled to investigate the art question. We share with them their interest in the subject. Unconsciously to ourselves, as a people and as individuals, we are now under the influence of a great law to which every people in turn yields allegiance when its time has come. At a certain stage of its intellectual development every nation and race becomes ripe for the utterance of certain ideas, either by language or by some outward manifestation. It may be a rage for war, or political ideas, or theological dogmas, or poetic emotions, or art aspirations; one at a time or all together. Whatever they are, and however and whenever these ideas demand expression, pioneer minds are always found to give a concrete form to the ideas which vaguely sway the masses, and demand utterance, and the people accept these master-minds, these seers and guides, for their leaders; not always without some demur at first, for the greater

the leader the farther can he descry what is before, and the more earnest he is in keeping in advance, often so distancing his age that weary years elapse before the people reach the point where they can see what he has seen and felt long before.

On approaching the subject under our consideration, we find at the outset that it includes two general divisions; of these the first regards the theory or principles upon which all true art is founded. The second division includes the methods by which those principles are or may be put into practice. And derived from these, we find a third head or conclusion, which indicates the relation that art bears to us or the public, and the position which we bear to art, whether as artists, connoisseurs, or learners.

Art, then, in the acceptation of the term as we are now considering the question, may be said in a general way to spring from the poetic yearnings and emotions suggested by aspirations after the true, the good, and the beautiful. Poetry or poetic writing is the expression of such feelings in language, appealing directly to the imagination. There is also such a thing as musical art, appealing to the imagination by the ear. Art, *par excellence*, is, however, the material means

for expressing similar ideas, appealing to the imagination through the eye by the use of external forms of utterance. As these all spring from the same source they bear a certain analogy to each other, and although some who have given their attention more exclusively to the study of art than to the study of literature and music, deny such analogy, it does yet so far exist as to afford frequent points of resemblance which can serve as illustrations of which we may occasionally avail ourselves.

It has been already observed, that art is a spontaneous form of expressing yearnings after the good, the true, and the beautiful. This is more especially the case in the early history of the art of a people, so far as the good and the true are particularly concerned; this is indicated by the fact that religious architecture has been invariably the first of the arts to receive attention in past history. The different orders of architecture have always produced their masterpieces in the form of temples, mosques, and cathedrals. To these have followed tombs in various and sumptuous styles of beauty. Each grows out of man's relations to his Creator, and to his existence hereafter. If, in our country, or in other nations yet to be founded on the model of ours, sacred architecture is

not the first of the fine arts to be developed, it is because we are a composite race who began our national existence in an anomalous way, bringing to this country the civilization and the architecture of the various already long-established nations from which we sprung.

Sculpture follows, and then accompanies architecture, and, like that, is devoted at first to the expression of our spiritual nature, delineating gods and saints. Last come the arts of design. But if at the outset art is the expression of the yearnings within us after the good, the true, and the beautiful, it does not always comprehend all these three principles, being often confined to the expression of the beautiful, and in a degree of the true, for art is not alone the expression of certain sentiments or ideas common to all men at certain periods of their history. It may also be, in a more restricted degree, the expression of feelings local and temporary and purely national. It is only the highest art that is cosmopolitan. Thus there are poets, like Homer and Shakespeare, of the first order, who sing for all ages, and interpret conditions common to all mankind. There are others, like De Musset or Wordsworth, Victor Hugo or Scott, who are rather the bards of an epoch or a race. It is not their fault that they are not for all time, like your Homers or your

Shakespeares. They speak only what is in them. In like manner there are artists of both kinds. Phidias and Ictinus, the builders of the Parthenon, which still in its ruins stands majestic on the brow of the Acropolis, gazing serenely over the plains of Athens and the blue Egean beyond, and Salamis where the Greek vanquished the Persian, still stately and peerless, while the ages pass by and salute it, the miracle and the despair of the generations, — Anthemius, who reared the matchless dome of St. Sophia in the air to withstand wars, earthquakes, and fires for fifteen centuries, — Mattheus Fernandez, who built the fairy-like cloisters of Batalha, each one a lyric in stone, and he who designed St. Ouen's magnificent house of prayer, — are they not greater, are they not more the men of all time, than the architects who devise the Opera House at Paris, or the new Houses of Parliament at London, useful and sumptuous as they are? Are not Praxiteles and Michael Angelo, Raphael and Claude, Murillo and Rubens, Rembrandt and Wilkie, greater men than Canova or Gibson, Spagnoletto or Frith, or the men who, with admirable talent for form and color, give expression to the demands of a depraved public taste or a transient political frenzy, like David, Gericault, or Cabanel? You observe, doubtless, that we are proceeding on the assump-

tion that there is a moral or subjective element in art, otherwise called the good and the true, — a theory which French artists and critics of the last twenty-five years generally deny both in theory and practice, confining themselves to the physically beautiful as the all-sufficient end of the highest art. That is one reason why contemporary French art, setting aside its technical excellences, is not now and never can be, as now conducted, the highest art, while the Germanic races, acknowledging the moral element in art, have a better chance of reaching the quality of the pictorial art of the Renaissance. But while artists are undoubtedly the interpreters of the emotions and aspirations of an age, or of mankind, and are responsible for what they say, no less than other men, they are at the same time unconsciously the interpreters of these emotions which they share with their fellow-men. A poet who writes with a set purpose to introduce a new style or revolutionize thought, and not because an irresistible impulse impels him, is by so much less a poet; and the same holds good in the case of the artist.

In artists of the first rank the balance of the powers is such that in their works we see approximately expressed the fundamental principle, that the good, the true, and the beautiful, are the foundations on

which art is based. Minor artists show their inferiority by inclining much more strongly to one than to the other, as well as by laying great stress on certain phases of art which are of a temporary character, resulting from conventional abuse of the principles of art, as when the pre-Raphaelites, in their earnest quest after the true in art to succeed the conventionalisms of the eighteenth century, disregarded the limitations which the practice of art imposes on its followers, and undertook to represent every detail they saw in nature on canvas, practically ignoring, thereby, the ideal in art, and demonstrating the feebleness of the materials at our disposal when we place ourselves face to face with Nature. The contemporary French school also shows that, noble as it is in many respects and worthy our respectful attention, it is yet not equal as a whole to that of the Renaissance in Italy or Spain, for it proceeds on the theory that the beautiful alone is the origin and the end of all art; thus while recognizing the ideal rather more than the pre-Raphaelite school, it is lacking in another direction, and so far holds a proportionately lower rank.

If the good, the true, and the beautiful are the source of the highest art, the ideal is in its turn the

ultimate aim of art, and imparts to mere inanimate stone and mortar, cold marble, or opaque ochres and minerals the power of yielding infinite pleasure to the intellectual and spiritual element in man. To suggest ideas, to quicken the imagination, to touch the secret spring which moves the emotions, and thus to please, to influence, to educate and to elevate, this is the highest province of art. No mere technical excellences can make up for the absence of the ideal in a work of art; and its presence in a high degree in a statue or a painting may cover a multitude of technical sins. In the exercise of the imagination man becomes a creator, and seems akin to the supreme Creator himself. In the words of Couture, "In art the ideal is everything. With painters of an inferior order you may find surprising technical skill and knowledge; but lacking the ideal and the moral element, their productions seem but of moderate value."

Let us not, however, be misunderstood upon this point. The first requisite to good art must be and is excellence in its technical qualities, as in good literature, grand as the ideas of the writer may be, if he have not the power of successfully expressing his thoughts, their influence upon others must amount to

little or nothing. So the idealist or moralist who employs art forms to convey his thoughts must have a practical knowledge of the methods of art expression, even more than in the field of letters. A man may be a good colorist and yet a poor idealist, a good copyist from nature but weak in other respects, but he is, notwithstanding, entitled to be considered an artist to a certain degree. But, granting this fact, it still remains true that he who to technical excellence adds high ideal qualities is necessarily the greater artist.

Concerning the oft-mooted question as to the distinction between the fine arts and industrial art, I confess to seeing little, if any, difference between the two just so long as the beautiful is a common end of each. As regards the industrial workman and the artist, if each is inspired by an intense love for the pursuit of the beautiful, then each is an artist indeed, the only possible difference being that a painter or a sculptor has superior advantages for expressing the emotions which underlie the highest art. The difference seems to be rather in degree than in kind. And as to the relative art character of their works, it is difficult to see exactly where they differ. It is not easy to perceive why Benvenuto Cellini is an artist

when he executes his bronze statue of Perseus, but ceases to be such when he designs his silver salt-cellar for Francis I. Is the man who with exquisite feeling for the beautiful designs and carves an elegant arm-chair for a drawing-room not an artist, because he has made a bit of domestic furniture, while the man who carved the exquisite oaken stalls in the choir of Chester Cathedral is an artist because his chairs were intended for a cathedral? On analyzing the difference, therefore, between what are generally styled the industrial and the fine arts, it would seem to be at the point where the beautiful ceases to be equally the aim of the artist and the artisan. A chair may be made sufficient for comfort by an average carpenter. But when the artisan steps into an establishment for the distinct purpose of adding beauty to that chair, does he not by that very act bring that chair within the domain of art, even if it be but on the threshold? The art of some nations has hardly progressed beyond the so-called industrial arts, like that of the Etruscans and the Japanese, and yet how superb they are. Are we to deny them the credit of success in the fine arts? Are we to assert that Kosaki, one of the leading contemporary ar-

tists of Japan, is not an artist because he designs wall-papers? Why not then dispense altogether with the distinctive terms, and include everything under the general head of art, every material work of man which has for its end the beautiful?

Such, then, as we have seen, is the scope of art, — the good, the true, and the beautiful, the highest art including all, while all art is inspired at least by the beautiful, and the ideal is the standard towards which all art should tend.

II.

We now come to a consideration of the modes and limitations of art, a very broad field which can only be sketched in, while much that might be said upon it could only be fully understood by those who have a practical technical knowledge of art. The arts may be generally classed under two grand divisions, — the plastic arts and the arts of design. Under the first may be included everything that is capable of being represented by clay models, even if eventually transferred to wood, stone, or metal. At the outset we find ourselves confronted by the three grand limitations of art. These limitations are form, light, and

shade, or *chiaro-oscuro* and color. The plastic arts have to deal chiefly with form. To be sure, a statue may be colored, as the Greeks and the Egyptians sometimes painted their sculptures, and the Spaniards their statues of saints, but it is so universally condemned at the present day, as was the case when Gibson, the English sculptor, tinted his statue of Venus, that virtually sculpture need concern itself with form alone, leaving to the imagination the addition of color. Light and shade may or may not add to its value, as, for example, in the allowable difference between *alto-relievo* and *basso-relievo*, and therefore they are not indispensable to the conception of the originating mind. *Terra cotta*, or fictile art, if it is adorned with black and white or colored decorations, includes also the arts of design. Architecture, which is beyond question one of the fine arts, when of an æsthetic character, occupies a position of its own which may, like St. Peter's at Rome, include in the ideal of the architect all the arts for its completion; but thoroughly to conceive and to carry out such a complete plan the architect should also be a Michael Angelo, who combines in himself the natural capacity and the practical knowledge to be at once architect,

sculptor, and painter. Failing this, he must be content to deal with form alone, leaving color to be added, perhaps, by some other mind not wholly in accord with his own. Whatever be the practice in modern times, it is now conceded that color and gilding entered into the plans of the founders of all the leading orders of architecture. The arts of design include in turn form alone; form and color in what is termed flat tints, — that is, colors without gradation, like the frescoes of Pompeii and most oriental art; form and *chiaro-oscuro*, called black and white, and all three together. If Dr. Hopkins is right in his theory that the more is required to the full accomplishment of the end of an individual object or being the higher must be the rank to which it is assigned, — and he is seldom wrong, — then the arts of design, requiring for their full fruition the whole art triad, are entitled to the highest rank in the scale of art, which may, perhaps, be the reason why they have been the last to reach success in the history of every race which has made any progress in the arts. First comes form, then *chiaro-oscuro*, and lastly color.

In the consideration of color we find that there are three primary colors, blue, red, and yellow, and

three secondary colors, — purple, composed of red and blue, — orange, from red and yellow, — green, from the mixture of blue and yellow. Grays and browns are compounds of the three primary colors in various proportions. Complementary colors are the opposite of any given color. The complementaries of a primary color are the two remaining primaries; of a secondary color the primary not employed in its composition, as for example, to green composed of blue and yellow red is the complementary color. This can be easily observed by any one when looking at a closed blind, behind which the sun is rising. The green slats will make an impression on the eye, which will be found to be red if one closes his eyes and analyzes the impression left on the eyeball. Color may be considered the emotional element in painting. Some are so constituted as to be moved by modulated shades of color as by the strains of music, to joy or to tears. The ardent people who dwell in tropic climes have a passion for glowing colors. The more sober races who inhabit northern regions affect more the gray tones. Women, more emotional in temperament than men, aspire to brilliant hues, and this being in subtle harmony with their disposition, it is

permitted by custom in northern countries, while a man in a scarlet coat and pantaloons of vivid green would be hooted at in the streets by the idlers at the corner groggeries unless he were a soldier or a fireman. They deal with a fiery element and it is considered quite in keeping for them to sport startling uniforms. Scarlet is the emblem of rage, and even the brute creation are susceptible to the emotions aroused by that inflammable color. We always associate red with a tropical sunset. Turner added an awful significance to his painting of the slave-ship throwing her slaves overboard in a storm, by representing the sun the hue of blood sinking low down over a gray waste of angry sea. Black and white are hues in harmony with our deeper and more solemn emotions. We put on black for mourning; the Chinese with equal propriety, considering the climate, wear white for the same cause. A clergyman of the Episcopal Church assumes a surplice of white, and when he is about to address his audience upon their relations to eternity, adds to it a black robe. Golden rays are painted around the Saviour's head to suggest the effulgence of heaven. The colors appertained formerly to the expression of religious or political

ideas, as we find them still symbolically employed in heraldry. It has been recently discovered that the insane may be cheered when depressed, or quieted when violent, by being placed in rooms colored with warm or cool tints. These examples, from many, indicate beyond doubt that, whether consciously or unconsciously, color appeals more directly to the soul than to the intellect, and is the most poetic and emotional element in art.

An eye for color is natural. Very many are wholly or partially color blind. Not unfrequently the perception of color varies like the temperament, according to the period of life. I knew a clergyman who ordered a scarlet suit; he was about to wear it into the pulpit, discerning no difference between that and black. But he was happily a married man, and the remonstrances of his wife at last availed to dissuade him from making a spectacle of himself that would have alarmingly stimulated the latent chuckle in the younger members of his congregation. A scientific knowledge of the chromatic effects, and the harmony and the scale of different or complementary colors, is essential in these days in the so-called industrial arts, so enormous is the demand for new and attractive

patterns. But such colorists as Titian, Rubens, Reynolds, Turner, or Delacroix, must after all depend, and did depend, upon the rare instincts of genius to guide them rather than upon any set of rules that have been deduced since their time, as Homer, Petrarch, and other true poets are directed rather by their own intuitive inspirations than by the rules of prosody and syntax in the use of language to which their own works have given form and stability. The rendering of form and light and shade, although at their best the product of genius, is more than an eye for color, the result of observation, study, and earnest practice, founded of course on native talent in a more or less degree.

In the application to practice of the three principles on which are based the arts of design, we encounter several points requiring careful consideration, — perspective, tone, values, and composition. Perspective is the term applied to the science or faculty of imparting to a plane surface the effect of distances and solids. It is divided into linear and aërial perspective. The former is in reality the application of geometry to drawing, and is therefore founded upon geometric lines, proceeding, in angular and parallel perspective, in diminishing ratio to given vanishing points of view along an imaginary horizon rep-

resenting the level of the eye above the plane of the earth or any other surface, as for example, the floor of this hall. Toward this point of view all lines and forms converge in absolute receding degrees. But in oblique perspective the points of view are above or below the horizon line. Linear perspective may therefore be classed among the exact sciences. Aërial perspective is more a matter of feeling, and the most careful, sympathetic observation of nature, as it means the rendering of the relations of objects in the scale of distances, as in the relative distinction between several ranges of mountains. One would suppose perspective to be so essential that no drawing or painting could be destitute of it and come under the head of art. But the art of the Assyrians, the Egyptians, the Hindus, the Chinese, and the Japanese, substantially ignores linear perspective, and yet, in view of what they have accomplished, we cannot deny to some of them a high position among those who aspire to represent the ideal. Such scientific artists as Dürer and Da Vinci seem also to have been ignorant of oblique perspective.

Tone is a term borrowed from music, and is suggested by the limited power of material colors to give the impression of light. Pure white is the nearest approach to

sunlight we have, except gold, which can be only rarely used with proper effect. Now if you take a bit of white paint, or the whitest sheet of paper you can find, and place it in contrast with light, you shall find it appear opaque and gray; and yet we have nothing brighter to answer for the highest lights either in painting or drawing. Taking white, then, as the starting-point, everything has to be pitched upon the low key which it affords us. Therefore we have to paint the parts in shade darker than they appear to us in nature, in order to make the light parts tell. The stronger the effect of light required, the stronger must be the contrast, or in other words, the lower must be the tone of the picture. This is the more important from the fact that although white is so much below pure light in strength, yet it is only in the minutest quantities, and then very rarely that it is ever admissible without the intermixture of other colors. In water-color painting, owing to the superior brilliance of water colors, the use of pure white for the strongest lights is permitted rather oftener by scratching the paper. But even thus the effect is hardly that of nature, for natural light verges on yellow, and the brightest objects we see in nature represent a variety of prismatic tints. The fleecy white scirrus clouds, or

masses of cumuli rolling up in the west like ranges of snow-clad Himalayas, seem to us on superficial observation to be pure, unmixed white; but if you paint them thus, how cold, how chalky, how unreal, they look.

The term values grows out of the same cause as tone. It relates to the degree of light-giving power contained in colors other than white. For example, supposing from the red in a given painting we extract the red quality, what is the value of the light which the pigment would then bear to the rest of the picture? To observe the values is, therefore, to undertake to preserve a just equilibrium between a certain effect and the materials at the artist's command, by avoiding violent contrasts, or strengthening one part at the expense of another. In order to do this, the whole painting sometimes requires to be pitched on a low key. Much feeling for the sober beauties of nature may be expressed by giving prominence to the preservation of the values; but it is not the only principle to be observed in art, and undue stress may sometimes be laid upon it; it can be disregarded with safety, however, only by artists of real capacity and correct intuitions, who do so knowingly. There is no evidence that an analysis of the theory of values entered into the practice of art before this century; but the great

masters ignored it skillfully, because directed by the instincts of genius.

Composition implies and really means the application of the principles we have been considering to the conception of a work of art. It therefore is the last in the scale of art studies which the artist requires to learn, and taxes all his knowledge and talents, for rightly to compose implies nothing less than the harmonizing of the material means of expression with the artist's ideal. One may say that the artistic mind begins to compose as soon as it scratches its first scrawl on a slate. This is true; but then the young artist draws only on imperfect knowledge and observation, and his design is rather a rude ideal unaided by art, to which an untutored fancy lends the glamour of reality. In proportion as his art knowledge increases he endeavors to impart to his ideal a resemblance to nature, and the higher the field of art which he aspires to reach, the greater must be the genius for composition. The architect not only requires a knowledge of the various schools of architecture, a fancy reveling in the majestic and the beautiful, and a keen observation of natural forms, for decorative architecture should be suggested by objects in nature, a fact not sufficiently considered by our architects it is to be feared; but

to these requirements the architect must also add a profound practical knowledge of mathematics and mechanics, and the strength of building materials, in order that he may base his ideal structure upon firm foundations. The sculptor must also understand the value of geometric forms, and the quality of the substance out of which he must carve or cast the statue that is to give him immortality. The exquisite statue of Mercury, by Jean di Bologna, which is known to every art lover, is a very remarkable instance of the ideal successfully reduced to bronze, by a nice calculation of weights and forces: could anything be more graceful, illustrating at the same time Hogarth's line of beauty, and so preserving the equilibrium between the weight of the different parts that the figure seems to be poised in air, actually descending with a message from cloud-compelling Jove.

The painter has a still more difficult task in composition, for he has to deal at once with form, *chiaro-oscuro* color, tones, values, and perspective. The greater the scope of his genius, the better will he be able to harmonize these various conditions in the expression of a given ideal; and the more he has these principles thoroughly incorporated into his being, the more firmness and daring will there be in the forms he designs, the more certainty

in his light and shade, the more purity and sweetness in his colors. Some painters, or schools of art, are stronger in one or another attribute of composition, but there scarcely exist any works of the greatest schools which excel in all. Raphael, although inferior to Titian in color, is thought by some to have approached, in his "Sistine Madonna," as near the equal balancing of the various qualities required in a complete painting, as it seems possible for man to reach with his limited powers, and the limited character of the means of expression at his disposal. So exceedingly rare and difficult is it for all the requirements to a complete painting, — the ideal, form, color, *chiaro-oscuro*, and values, to be united in one great harmonious whole, — that Kaulbach deliberately expressed the opinion, that in the representation of a great ideal composition color should be omitted, as interfering with the satisfactory utterance of the artist's conception. In so saying he indicated the limits of his own powers, however, rather than any rule for the guidance of greater artists. His cartoon of the "Reformation," in black and white, is not less impressive than his colored frescoes; while on the other hand, such men as Leonardo da Vinci, Correggio, Veronese, or Rubens, do not seem to have found the employment of color a hindrance to the just expression of their magnificent ideals.

III.

The truth of the principles upon which all good Art is based, as we have now considered them, has been tested and approved by the practice of many ages, and is substantially accepted by most artists and art critics deserving attention. The points wherein we may vary from them do not materially affect the general correctness of our statements. But the greatest variety of opinion is found when we come to consider the reduction of the foregoing principles to practice. Men who agree as to the principles of art, shall often be found disagreeing as to the modes of harmonizing the ideal with the material, and the relative importance of the truths which underlie all art. Hence spring jealousies and animosities, pride and contempt, intolerance and injustice, rival schools, and abundance of one-sided, prejudiced, jaundiced, and absurd art criticism by sciolists, who have got hold of a few art terms, but have neither practical nor true theoretical knowledge of the matter under consideration. This is a vast field, belonging nearly as much to history as to the fine arts, and we can give it but brief notice in rapid and general terms.

In the plastic arts there is the least diversity between

theory and practice, because the elementary principles involved are fewer, and because the materials for expressing the ideal are more limited. Clay, wood, and stone suggested themselves at the outset as the means of utterance; later, the metals were added to the list in sculpture, and in this age, iron enters largely into the plans of the architect. The mathematical problems underlying both were solved long since. The mathematical principles by which the Memnonium at Thebes was erected three thousand years ago, are still the guide of the architect of to-day. The Parthenon, modeled after the simple but majestic order called the Doric, and the most perfect if not the most interesting building ever constructed, it has been ascertained by the most careful measurements, was planned and executed upon a profound knowledge and application of geometric forms; it may be added, that there is not a straight line in the building, all the lines forming very subtle concentric curves to a given point, of course, vastly distant; while the principles underlying all true architecture were crystallized, ages ago, into certain orders adapted to the needs and yearnings of the races and climes where they originated. Adaptation to climatic and social needs and the materials at hand is the great underlying principle

of architecture. The Romans invented the arch, or at least first employed it among European races. At a later period, the various styles of the Byzantine, Gothic, and Saracenic orders sprung from the impulses of Christianity and Mohammedanism. The classic orders have the stately symmetry of epic poetry; the Gothic, dealing with vaulting shafts and pointed arches, is more flexible and emotional in character, resembling lyric poetry; Renaissance architecture is rather a medley than a distinctive order, and results from an attempt to revive the architecture of the ancient Romans; it is very florid in decoration, and is distinguished by the double dome invented by Bruneleschi. There are other styles, but these are the leading ones. Centuries have now elapsed since the last order of architecture was developed. Shall the world ever see another, and what shall be the race or who the genius to create it?

In sculpture, Chantry, Pradier, Rauch, or Thorwaldsen, among the moderns, may choose subjects more in accordance with modern sentiment, but they model and execute upon the same materials as the ancients, and with but trifling variation in modes of applying rules from the means employed by the men who bequeathed to the generations the Venus de Milo, the Wingless

Victory, or the Laocoön, to indicate the powers and the limitations of plastic art. In Ceramic art there seems to be, perhaps, an exception to the general rule. To surpass the Portland Vase may be, perhaps, impossible, but modern science seems at least to suggest new modes for executing and designing pottery, as in the case of Sévres ware, invented by Palissy, ages after the Greeks, the Chinese, and the Japanese had perfected their modes of manufacturing pottery, or the magnificent *pâte tendre* of Limoges, created under our own eyes at the present time; or the superb Minton porcelains and the Doulton faience, the latter dating no farther back than 1870, and indebted for its designs to the artistic ability of a number of highly gifted ladies.

In the Plastic arts, clay is, of course, the first material used. When one sees the lump of brown earth, he can with difficulty realize the fairy-like statue or magnificent vase which lie concealed in that shapeless bit of mud. The sculptor forms a slight frame or skeleton of iron rods or wire, and upon these, with simple tools of wood, models bones, and muscles, and drapery, and breathes into them the soul of genius, and, presto, we see before us the magical being which is to give delight and instruction to ages yet unborn. The clay model, com-

ing directly from its creator's brain, is generally more interesting than the marble or bronze statue eventually made from it. In pottery, the simple moulding-wheel of primeval ages is still employed, and marl or fuller's earth is the material generally used. But modern chemical science seems constantly to suggest new methods for producing glazes and fixing colors.

But when we come to consider the arts of design, we find ourselves distracted by conflicting opinions whirling about our heads, like the souls driven violently to and fro by warring winds in Dante's Hell. Ponderous volumes, vehemently advocating the peculiar art-views of this or that art critic or artist, seem to hurtle through the air; acrimonious debate, illogical arguments, and torrents of voluble abuse, vigorous and prejudiced as the eloquent invectives of Bishop South against the Puritans, tend to bewilder the judgment and hinder a calm review of the case. Briefly, the question seems to stand as follows.

The ancient Greeks and the Romans undoubtedly reached a good degree of excellence in the arts of design. What the Romans were able to do, we can judge approximately from the frescoes on the walls of Pompeii. These indicate a careful study of the harmonies of color, a perception of the value of the ideal in art, conventional

treatment in the rendering of animals and landscape, but a good knowledge of the human figure. Of the painting of the Greeks we can only judge by the accounts handed down to us of the excellence achieved by such men as Apelles, the description given by Pausanias of the scenes painted on the walls of the temple at Delphi, very graphic and minute, the bas-reliefs and drawings still existing on temples and pottery, and the conclusion reached by analogical reasoning, that a people so successful in other branches of art would not have bestowed such praise on the paintings of Apelles and Protogones, unless they had really possessed great artistic merit. But the paintings of the Greeks, and of the ancients generally, were undoubtedly executed in water colors, often mixed with wax and applied in a style called encaustic, because fixed by artificial heat. Whether the principles of perspective, *chiaro-oscuro*, and values were thoroughly understood by them, remains an open question.

Water colors, in various forms, continued in use for many centuries, chiefly in fresco and distemper. The first is the application of liquid color to fresh plaster; the latter is the application of color mixed with size, milk, fig-tree sap, or white of egg, to a dry surface. Often oil has been laid over a painting done in distem-

per, and by chemically combining with the dry colors has very nearly given the effect of an oil painting. That the use of oil in the application of color was understood to a certain degree before the fifteenth century, would seem to be proved by the appearance of some of the Egyptian paintings still existing, by several recipes for the preparation of drying oil, dating in one case as far back as the fifth century A. D., and by specimens of rude oil paintings remaining from the thirteenth century. But if John and Hubert Van Eyck did not, as is generally supposed, wholly invent oil painting, they so improved the medium and mode of application as to introduce its general use, and become entitled to the name of inventors. The improvement of oil painting by Van Eyck did not, however, altogether supersede water colors. The Last Supper, by Da Vinci, the Judgment, by Michael Angelo, done after that time, indicate what may be accomplished by this medium, the use of which has been revived by the Germans, and employed with good success in the frescoes of the new Houses of Parliament, by a process called the water-glass method, which was invented for the preservation of frescoes; but time, the prover of all things, has proved water-glass painting not to be all that was claimed for it.

Water colors for easel paintings have been very much the rage in this century, especially in England. They possess a certain freshness and brilliancy in conveying the effect of atmospheric tints which is very pleasing. The grain of the paper aids the appearance of atmosphere and breadth, and the handling results in attractive suggestiveness. But they lack the element of permanence, which certainly gives great additional value to a really good work of art.

Oil colors, if they lack a degree of airiness, possess a solidity, a richness, a dignity, without which certain subjects cannot be properly treated, qualities which, other things being equal, should grow more and more intense when a painting is mellowed by time. There is scarcely anything about which there is a greater diversity of opinion than on the question as to how the great masters applied color in oil painting, and how they should be applied now; the fact being that every artist of original genius had or has his own method of employing oil colors. In some cases they have even kept their methods a secret that has died with them. Smaller artists implicitly follow the rules learned from their masters, but men of original power use color as a matter of feeling. One shall have a given ideal to express; it must be done by

mechanical means, and he feels that he can best reach the desired effect on canvas; others on panel or copper. Some prefer to gain what they are after by painting in solidly at the outset with body color. Others can, or think they can do it better by glazing and scumbling alternately with transparent and opaque tints. It may be well to add, that pigments are divided into two classes, the transparent and the opaque. To the former belong such colors as the madders, carmine, and the like, or certain earths, like mummy. The latter includes such colors as white and vermilion. Some colors are semi-transparent, like burnt sienna. Ultramarine, made from powdered lapis lazuli, is, of all paints, the most costly, the most beautiful, the most valuable for obtaining the effect of atmosphere, and is imperishable. It is also the only pigment that represents one of the primary colors pure and simple. That the blues in Titian's "March of Bacchus," and other celebrated paintings centuries old, are so much more prominent than the other colors at the present day, is due to the permanence of the ultramarine they used, while the other tints have grown fainter or darker. *Bleu lumière*, a color recently discovered, rivals the brilliance of ultramarine, but its durability remains to be tested by time. The most permanent of

all colored pictures are mosaics, often so wonderfully excuted that they pass for oil paintings. Formerly, as in the mosaic ceilings of St. Sophia or St. Mark's, mosaic was made from small cubes of colored marbles, but now the Florentine mosaics are made of bits of colored glass, skillfully cut off from glass rods, and laid, as formerly, in a bed of mortar.

It is claimed by some that many of the great masters painted a picture first in solid monochromatic color, laying in form, and the scale of *chiaro-oscuro*, and superimposing the various tints afterwards by glazing; but of this there is no positive proof, although the process itself is quite possible. Some of the oil paintings of Sir Joshua Reynolds and Sir John Gilbert, among the moderns, are examples of the success that may be reached by this method by those who prefer to deal with only part of the requirements to a complete painting at once. Camaieu is the name given to a painting executed in monochrome, as, for example, a water-color done entirely with sepia. Caravagio, and Rembrandt in some of his works, painted substantially in camaieu. Some artists think shadows should always be painted thinly, because shade is full of light and it can, therefore, be best suggested by allowing the canvas to show faintly under the color; others are

of the very decided contrary opinion, that shadows should be painted solidly, and the lights broken in or glazed over the shadow. Some artists use considerable oil, or other vehicles; others but very little. Some prefer a spatula, or knife for laying on color; others, bristle brushes; others, again, confine themselves chiefly to sable brushes. And so on, *ad infinitum*, for each artist of any originality, feeling the limitations of material for expressing his ideal or transcribing actual scenes, experiments with his materials, and seeks to discover new methods for successfully conveying his ideas. The result achieved must be the test of the value of the methods employed by each artist. *Finis coronat opus.* The object of all true art is the expression of the ideal. If that ideal is satisfactorily rendered, what does it matter after all in what way the desired result is reached. But it does matter, in view of all these diversities, and the fact that art is a question of feeling as well as of dealing with inert substance, that we should not too arbitrarily dictate certain methods and condemn all others, lest by so doing we cramp the energies of each individual mind that sincerely seeks to express the truth in its own way. Oil colors, for example, may be in general of greater permanence and value than

water colors, and our opinion in their favor may be very decided; but if a Da Vinci or a Kaulbach appears, who can best express his vast ideals in water colors, or in charcoal, who shall say him nay? This very diversity of opinion regarding the methods of art has been productive of solid advantage to art progress. The feuds and prejudices spring from the infirmities of human nature, and the narrowness, or too often one-sided education of artists themselves; but the various methods of art expression furnish another illustration that the progress of the race is won by struggles and tentative means, and as Hegel demonstrates, by a series of actions and reactions, each forward movement bearing us farther onwards. To no one man, to no one school of art, has it been granted to demonstrate with complete success every principle and process of art in its works. Each, guided by the art limitations which beset him, or by the limits of his own faculties, selects this or that principle or method, and rejects others which may seem quite as important, or if using the others, subordinates them to the former; or he chooses one branch of art, the figure, landscape, or marine, and avoids the others. This may be done deliberately, after mature reflection and study, and is especially noticeable in the different styles of some great

masters at different periods of their art career. But generally it is the result of intuition, or bent of mind, unconsciously affected in some cases by influences in childhood. There is such a thing as inspiration in art as well as in poetry, although amid the mass of technical details, and the rigid methodical study and earnest application to mastering the very rudiments of art, we are liable to forget this. Beyond doubt nearly every one can reach a certain point in designing, without a special vocation for art, as all can learn to read and write, although all are not authors; but the great things in art, as in authorship, have been and must always be the direct result of inspiration in some form. Genius, in order to do itself justice, must of course be aided to the utmost by practical acquisition of each successive step in art knowledge, but we do not agree with Sir Joshua Reynolds in his opinion, that unremitting application alone is able to accomplish or rival the *chef-d'œuvres* of genius. The difference between the two, at their best, may be illustrated by the disparity in real greatness between the perfect temples of the Greeks and the Madeleine at Paris, intended to be a careful copy, or between an original Velasquez and a copy of the same. Was it talent alone that covered the walls

of the ducal palace at Venice with the magnificent creations of Tintoretto, or inspired the astonishing groups in the Last Judgment of Rubens? To be sure they had studied anatomy and composition, but no model posed for every one of the wonderful characters, which came forth on the canvas as if ushered from actual existence in another world by the wand of a magician, at every lightning stroke of the rushing arm impelled by the fury of genius, crowded by living ideals demanding expression. Herbert Spencer rightly says, "Only when genius is married to science can the highest results be achieved." But such science should be the intense study of nature even more than of art. What literature had Homer to study; yet he wrote with perfect science, the science of human nature. Talent follows, but genius leads; talent smoothes the paths through the forest, but genius first shows the way; talent imitates, genius creates; talent fills the schools, but genius founds the schools; talent studies art more than nature, genius studies nature more than art. It is a doubtful compliment to say of a work of art that it resembles the style of some celebrated artist, as it would indicate that its inspiration had been drawn more from schools than from nature. As Antæus gained new strength each time he

was felled to earth, so the artist adds to his resources whenever he revisits nature.

Let us illustrate the independent character of the methods by which genius reaches its ends, by an example: In the little town of St. Pol de Leon, in Brittany, overlooking the land of Lyonnesse, where King Arthur fought and fell, and the mystical Seven Islands, the Avilion of romance, ever gray and lonely in the sea-mists of that legendary coast, where they still believe he dwells to this day, — in that quaint little town, surrounded by myths and legends, and a picturesque people and country, stands the little known but not the less extraordinary spire of Notre Dame de Kreisker. It was built, according to tradition, by an Englishman whose name has not been recorded, and was pronounced by Vauban to be the most daring achievement in architecture. The chapel is small, and not especially remarkable; it is but the basis of the spire, which is everything. On four piers, at the junction of the nave and transept, presenting a base only thirty-two feet square, and supported at the corners alone, is reared a tower of most exquisite proportions, and while very elaborate, yet preserving a truly artistic breadth and purity of outline. From the platform, which extends across the piers and

forms the floor of the spire, one looks up to the finial at the extreme top, through a hollow shell of stone tracery work two hundred and fifty-two feet high, or over three hundred feet from the ground, and entirely clear of brace or buttress, pier, beam, or bracket; — nothing to break the astonishing sight but the doves flying in the dizzy cavity, or the sun flashing here and there through the open carvings, while the wind breathes from age to age a grand æolian chant through that organ of granite, that seems to the beholder as if it would topple over with a light breeze, but which has withstood the storms of five hundred years. Now, are we to affirm that the soaring intellect which conceived and executed that wonderful tower, in the night of the Dark Ages, was aided by study alone, when all the architects of the nineteenth century, with all the learning of the ages at their beck, have been unable to evoke from the realms of the Ideal a single creation, that in simplicity, beauty, sublimity, or originality, will compare with the almost miraculous tower of the unknown genius of St. Pol de Leon?

All art should be, and all true art is, founded on a careful study of nature and a practical knowledge of the scientific principles involved in its pursuit; but it does not follow, as some, carried away by the reaction

from the false and conventional schools of the last century would make us believe, that only direct copies of nature are worthy of consideration; for the great works of the masters prove just the contrary, and some minds work best, like that of Turner or Dietz, on compositions painted in the studio, founded, however, as a matter of course, upon a profound knowledge of nature. And here is where some able artists and critics make a mistake; finding that they themselves, from the constitution of their minds, can only work with a model or an actual landscape before them, they infer that all must always work, and even compose thus, forgetting that some of stronger memory or imagination and greater power of assimilating what they see, can work best in other ways. Different minds think in different ways, would be a truism, if it were not practically ignored; while the principles of art are the same everywhere and at all times, the application of those principles must be left to the bent of each individual after he has first thoroughly disciplined himself in the principles and science of art by careful study. In this country, at this time, artists have to do chiefly with acquiring the rudiments of art, — form, drawing, perspective, and

light and shade. There is, beyond doubt, abundant talent for art among us, but it is yet to a large degree untrained, and until recently it has been rather the fashion to ridicule the value of drawing or perspective, and enthusiastic art aspirants have rushed boldly into color without having even first learned to draw. In the art schools of Germany a student is required to devote an average of two years to drawing and *chiaro-oscuro*, before he is permitted to attempt the next step in art.

IV.

We have now considered the theory of art and the application of its principles to practice. Assuming that art is the outward expression of the good, the true, and the beautiful, one or all of which attributes are more or less evident in every genuine work of art according to its rank; assuming that the artist is the unconscious medium for giving utterance to the yearnings of an age or a race after the nobler sentiments which sway humanity; we now arrive at the point where we find that art has still another province, not so generally taken into consideration, but by no means the less important on that account. This is

the relation which the art public bears towards art and artists, and the real character of art in its bearings upon society as a civilizing element. That this is a point rarely regarded is evident from the way in which ninety-nine out of an hundred people approach a work of art. Instead of acting as if art were a means of improvement and culture, which all are willing to grant that it is theoretically, they pique themselves upon their preconceived notions, prejudices, and ignorance of nature, and then attempt to square the painting or sculpture to their own restricted views instead of first endeavoring to see if they may not learn something from it. If it be a painting of past schools they forget that in order to do it full justice they need, by study of the history and opinions of the times when it was done, to identify themselves with the past before they can appreciate the motives which gave the artist his inspiration; and if they fail at first to be impressed with the power of celebrated works of art, let them remember, in the words of a great artist, that "those who behold the sea for the first time are astonished by the slight impression it produces upon them: a horizontal line, an abundance of water; that is all! That is indeed all

for him who does not understand it; but for him who knows how to look, what a wonder is the sea! The sight of the beauties of antiquity, the paintings of Raphael, Michael Angelo, Rubens, Titian, Rembrandt, — all that is really great, does not overcome us at once."

In contemplating contemporary works of art, if they do not at the first glance seem to us like what we consider nature, before we condemn the work let us reflect whether it is not possible that the artist who has devoted his life to the study of those phases of nature knows about them as well as we do, and whether it is not possible that instead of flinging contempt upon the artist and his work we may learn something from it. Almost every great artist who has struck out in a new style, as it is called, has been forced to endure neglect at the outset simply because he had discovered something in nature which others had not yet seen, and tried to describe it as it appeared to him. By dint of constantly bringing the subject before the public he finally wins a certain number to discern the truths he sees, and creates an audience and a school. He in turn gives place to another who has other discoveries to unfold.

Such is the history of great artists and art schools; and thus one by one certain truths of creation are revealed for the instruction and elevation of humanity, as certainly as scientific truths are gradually discovered by men of science. In the days of Queen Anne the beauties of landscape and marine were very imperfectly understood and appreciated in Europe, even by cultivated people. The poets and artists of the last hundred years have actually created a complete revolution in public thought on the subject. It should be remembered that there may be almost as many ways of looking at nature as there are individual minds to look at it. Take, as an illustration, the question of perspective. Let us suppose three photographers to be taking a photograph of a certain building, the instruments being close enough to each other to touch, yet there shall be a perceptible difference in the form of each impression of that building produced on the paper. We all know how it is if several men undertake to give an account of a certain event which they all witnessed at the same time. They may all be men of equal veracity, yet each shall repeat a story differing in details from the others. One incident made most impression on the mind of this one;

another incident was most vividly fixed on the memory of another witness. Now this is exactly the way in which we all see nature. Therefore, instead of at once extinguishing an artist because he illustrates some phase of nature which does not seem natural to us, let us first ascertain whether what he represents looks unnatural to us because it is inconsistent with nature, or because it is true but never before observed by us. If the latter be the case, then the painting has fulfilled its end in adding to our knowledge and our pleasure in contemplating nature.

In the consideration of art we need to shake ourselves free from preconceived prejudices and opinions, and sometimes from the influence of great artists whom we may admire, for even artists are often swayed by narrowness and intolerance, caused rather by individual idiosyncrasy than anything in the nature of art to produce such a result. We need to approach the subject, not as accusers or defenders, but as jurors; not as advocates or pleaders, whose office it is to strengthen the evidence on one side and weaken that on the other, but as judges prepared impartially and kindly to weigh the evidence on both sides, and render a decision accordingly. Let us place ourselves

in the artist's point of view and endeavor candidly to discover what was the ideal or the truth to which he has undertaken to give expression. That this is the last process generally employed by the art public and the critics themselves in passing criticism on art and artists, is a fact so well known as to require no mention except as a warning. But that it is the only way is true not only because we can only thus do justice to those artists who are earnestly and conscientiously trying to harmonize the ideal with the truths of nature; but it is also the only way in which we can wholly acquire the elevating effect which is the final cause of all great art. Thus only can we acquire breadth and catholicity of intellectual vision. Is not the mind which can appreciate and enjoy Æschylus and Goethe, Wordsworth and Molière, the "Ramayana" and the "Wealth of Nations," the "Arabian Nights" and Argyle's "Reign of Law," the "Chronicles of the Cid" or Maury's "Equatorial Currents," likely to be broader, more expansive, more cultivated, more just, and does it not have a larger field of intellectual enjoyment than the mind which can only appreciate but one of these, and is shut up to only one class of literature? Is not he likely to have the larger and

juster musical judgment who understands and enjoys not only Schumann, but also Beethoven; not only German music but also Italian; who can soar not only to the serene level of classic harmonies, but can also feel a chord thrill in his soul when he hears a Sicilian Barcarola, and acknowledges the sweetness of one of Moore's Irish Melodies, or the wild pathos of "Old Folks at Home"? Even so it is with art in a yet more marked degree. The mind that from natural narrowness or educational prejudice likes, or resolves to like, only one school or branch of art, and declines to see any good in or to derive any pleasure from other schools, cannot be said to dwell upon as elevated a plane of thought as the mind which is in sympathy with the beauty and the instructiveness of architecture, sculpture, and painting in turn, and has the fairness and the capacity to appreciate and the humility to learn from the study of the great masters of all schools of all time.

Milton says, "a good book is the precious life-blood of a master-spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose for a life beyond a life." In like manner, if we consider every great work of art as containing some of the precious life-blood of a master-spirit, that

into it have been wrought the yearnings, the aspirations, the hopes, the despairs of mankind, we can approach the subject better prepared to understand what are its aims and tendencies, better to direct it by our influence when a depraved public taste or opinion would debase it from its high purposes, and better obtain for ourselves the moral, intellectual, and æsthetic advantages gained by a contemplation of the Ideal.

A review of the subject further suggests, that so naturally is art the outcome of certain phases of national growth that were all the world's histories for the last thirty centuries blotted out of existence, we might almost deduce a record of the progress of races and empires by the study of the relics of the fine arts which have come down to our day. In some cases this is actually what we are doing now. Hubert Bancroft has largely constructed his masterly history of the native races of the Pacific coast in North America, especially the Mayas of Yucatan, by an exhaustive investigation of their architectural remains still existing in the depths of the forest. The golden goblets and necklaces excavated by Dr. Schlieman at Troy, bring us into direct sympathy with Paris and Helen, and with Hector and Androm-

ache. The world's history is illustrated in the progress of the arts as the wars and triumphs of William the Conqueror were embroidered upon the famous Bayeux tapestry by Matilda his queen.

We find, further and lastly, that a consideration of the history of art shows it to be, at its best estate, a ministrant to man's higher nature. Through a contemplation of the material we are led up to the ideal. By patient toil and earnest search after the true, the artist gives such grace and truth to his conceptions as to shape public thought, and become a civilizer of the race in a greater or less degree. The culture of art is not religion; it may be even so abused as to appeal to our lower passions. But that is not its legitimate aim, and if not in itself religious, as some by their extravagance would almost have us believe, it may be so employed as to give expression to the devotional aspirations of the soul. Through art the material may be made to contribute to the elevation of the immaterial; and the symbolical myth of Pygmalion and his statue may become a reality indeed to the wrapt imagination to whom the ideal is not less true than the real and the earnest of an existence hereafter.

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